

Reimagining the language faculty: A multimodal model of language

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Natural human communication is multimodal. We pair speech with gestures, use emoji with our texting, and combine writing with drawings and images in places from doodles to comics to advertising. This communication is structurally complex, especially in contexts like visual narratives where grammatical structures organize both the sequential text (syntax) and the sequential images (narrative). Such complexity poses a challenge both to linguistic models that focus on single modalities, and to theories of multimodality where only a single form uses combinatorial structure (like in co-speech gesture). In addition, multimodal information clearly uses patterned “templates” akin to the productive lexicon of language, be it in comics, cartoons, memes, advertisements, and more. This presentation will outline a reimagining of the language faculty for addressing this complexity embedded within Jackendoff’s (2002) model of a Parallel Architecture of language. I will break down the primary modalities of spoken, bodily, and graphic communication into their constituent parts, and then show that the resulting interactions have systematic characterizations and profiles. Altogether, different types of human expression — speech, gesture, drawings, and their multimodal interactions — arise as emergent activation states out of this broader cognitive architecture. Such an approach can both guide research into multimodal communication and warrant a reconsideration of what constitutes the language system.